2012

# Two Concepts of Community

Erica L. Neely

*Ohio Northern University*, e-neely@onu.edu

## Recommended Citation

<center>Two Concepts of Community</center>

<center>Erica L. Neely</center>

Abstract: Communities play an important role in many areas of philosophy, ranging from epistemology through social and political philosophy. However, two notions of community are often conflated. The descriptive concept of community takes a community to be a collection of individuals satisfying a particular description. The relational concept of community takes a community to consist of more than a set of members satisfying a particular trait; there must also be a relation of recognition among the members or between the members and the community as a whole. The descriptive concept is simpler, however, it does not provide a sufficiently robust concept of community. I argue instead that the relational notion is philosophically richer and more accurately captures the true nature of a community.

I.      Introduction

Communities play an important role in much philosophical thinking.  Philosophers of language use the notion of linguistic communities in reference-fixing.[1]  Epistemologists track the transmission of knowledge within communities by considering chains of testimony.[2]  Social and political philosophers discuss communitarianism and problems that arise when an individual clashes with their community.[3]  All of these people discuss communities, yet it is not entirely clear what they mean by "a community."

A principal reason that it is difficult to determine the nature of communities is because there are two notions of community that are often conflated.  The first of these, which I will call the descriptive concept, takes a community to be a collection of individuals satisfying a particular description; we can define a community of all people living in a particular country, for instance.  The second notion, which I will call the relational concept, takes a community to consist of more than a set of members satisfying a particular trait; there must also be a relation of recognition among the members or between the members and the community as a whole.  By developing these two notions, I will show that the descriptive concept of community is not generally robust enough to capture our understanding of community; we need the richness of the relational concept to do it justice.  I will thus expand upon the nature of the relevant relation, as well as raise some issues for future exploration.

II.      The Descriptive Concept of Community

The descriptive concept of community is the simpler of the two notions.  Using this definition, a community is simply any set of individuals who share a common trait.  For instance, we can define

---

[1] The classical starting point for this is, of course, Hilary Putnam's discussion of the division of linguistic labor in "The Meaning of 'Meaning,'" although it has spawned a multitude of articles on the topic.

[2] C.A.J. Coady wrote one of the first comprehensive discussions of testimony in *Testimony: A  Philosophical Study*. Recently there has been a great deal of interest in testimony from many different perspectives; see for instance *The Epistemology of Testimony*, ed. Jennifer Lackey and Ernest Sosa.

[3] There are far too many readings on this topic to list, ranging from classical discussions by Karl Marx or John Stuart Mill, through contemporary debates over drug use or physician-assisted suicide. The conflict between the individual and his or her community has been a perpetual topic for philosophers.

the community of American citizens simply as all those people who satisfy the condition of being an American citizen. Any logical combination of properties will serve to define a community; it is not necessary to use only a single one. If we wish to consider the community of philosophy graduate students, for instance, we can define the community as those people who are both graduate students and people enrolled at a university to study philosophy. Similarly, it could be useful to consider the students of a particular college or department within a university. Suppose that Nowhere University offers four modern language majors: French, German, Spanish, and Italian. We can thus define the community of modern language majors, $C_L$, as consisting of those people who are a) enrolled at Nowhere University and b) majoring in French or German or Spanish or Italian.

These examples are all fairly straightforward. There are ways of clearly determining whether someone is an American citizen or a graduate student, as those properties are strictly defined by rules. However, the majority of communities defined this way are likely to be less clear-cut. For instance, consider the community of African-Americans, defined simply as consisting of all people who are African-American. Although this sounds straightforward at first glance, it will be much more difficult to determine the membership of this community because the property in question is fuzzy. Many factors have been used to classify people into races, including ancestry, appearance, and culture.[4] If we take being African-American to be determined by ancestry, it leaves open the question of how many ancestors with the trait must a person possess. Presumably a single non-African-American ancestor will not serve to exclude a person from this community. But it is not clear that a single African-American ancestor would serve to include a person in the community either; the boundaries likely lie somewhere in between, although it is not clear where.[5] Furthermore, we often use other criteria in our judgments about race, such as bodily appearance; while the set of people with a particular appearance may overlap with the set of people having a particular ancestry, the sets are unlikely to be identical. Hence, even though the descriptive concept of community is relatively straightforward to understand, there will be complications to determining community membership.

One oddity of membership worth mentioning is that, using this definition of community, it is possible to be a member of a community without anyone knowing it – including yourself. This notion of community membership is based on truth conditions: if you satisfy the description, you are a member of the community. It does not include any recognition conditions; hence, you do not have to be recognized as a member of that community, either by yourself or by others. Moreover, you are a member of the community even if others erroneously identify you as a non-member. If you are a French major at Nowhere University, you are a member of $C_L$, even if the majority of people think you are in Engineering.[6] Historically, descriptive concepts of race were used to try to

---

[4] See Charles Mills, " 'But What Are You *Really?'* The Metaphysics of Race," for a discussion of the multiplicity of concepts used to defined race.

[5] Two notes: first, the proximity of the relative will probably matter; both parents being of African-American descent is more likely to make a child a member of the community than two great-great-grandparents of such ethnicity. Second, the criteria for membership of this community will vary over time, since there have been eras in which a single African-American ancestor would, indeed, serve to include the person in the community.

[6] Obviously at least one person will have to believe that you are a French major, namely whoever is handling the administration of enrolling majors. That, however, is simply in the nature of being a French major; it requires the consent of others to obtain. The fact remains that none of your peers need to think that you are a French major for you to be one.

prevent people from passing – the idea was that even if you appeared to be white, you still "really" were black because you satisfied some criterion of ancestry.[7] However, the descriptive conception of community actually is stronger than that because it claims that you could be wrong about your own community membership as well.[8] This might seem somewhat bizarre; after all, often communities are lauded because of the bonds between members or the communication that goes on within them.[9] This interaction clearly cannot take place if people are unknowingly members of a community, which raises the question of whether such a collection of people truly should count as a community.

There are two other serious problems for the descriptive concept of community. First, it is not clear that this concept is sufficient to define many of the communities mentioned in the opening paragraph. For instance, trying to devise a description that would generate the right set of individuals for a linguistic community is difficult. We cannot simply amass all the people who are native speakers of a particular language; being a native English-speaker in the United States is not the same as being a native English-speaker in England. Hence we cannot define our linguistic community as containing all native English speakers, since this is simply too broad a description to capture any useful notion of linguistic community.

One way of refining our notion of a linguistic community would be to complicate the description by including a geographical location, but this almost certainly will also be insufficient; different groups of English speakers may have different dialects or use different slangs than another. The primary feature of their linguistic community is not that the members' native language is English, but more that they are members of a particular group and those members agree on the ways in which they use language. This characterization is not a straightforward description that the members satisfy; it speaks to the relation that holds among the members of a group, or between a person and the other speakers whom she emulates.[10]

Even if we ignore the difficulty inherent in formulating descriptions for particular communities, a second issue remains. There is a kind of arbitrariness to community membership on the descriptive concept which makes the community seem unsubstantial: if communities are formed simply by collecting sets of individuals satisfying particular conditions, then almost any group could qualify as a community. This includes groups such as the set of people with blue eyes who are over six feet tall and live in Chicago. While we can certainly describe this collection, do we really want to claim that it delineates a community? In general we seem to want communities to have more coherence than we are likely to receive by random (or semi-random) generation. We place more weight on communities than on other collections of people. As mentioned above, when we talk about communities we stress the importance of common bonds or communication or fellow feelings – these are not things that are likely to occur by simply gathering up all of the people who fit a particular arbitrary description. Thus while community members may satisfy many of the same

---

[7] Cheryl I. Harris discusses the desire to classify people who might be passing as white in "Whiteness as Property."

[8] One place you see this in common use is sexual orientation; it is not unusual to encounter discussions of what a person's sexuality "really" is, even if the person is taken to be in denial of it.

[9] I will discuss these ideas in more detail below.

[10] I suspect that we are actually members of nested linguistic communities, wherein our particular dialect is a subcommunity of our particular language. Since we have not yet succeeded in formulating a purely descriptive notion of a linguistic community, however, it seems overly optimistic to consider linguistic subcommunities as well. Suffice to say that the account of what linguistic communities we belong to will almost certainly be complicated.

descriptions, there is another aspect of community membership that should be considered as well; this is how the relational concept of community arises.

III.     The Relational Concept of Community

Given the problems faced by the descriptive concept of community, one might wonder why anyone would entertain it, even momentarily, as an adequate understanding of community.  The answer is that  most communities involve a descriptive component, and it is easy to slide from using the description as shorthand to taking the description to be a full definition of the community.  When we consider the situation more rigorously, however, the insufficiency is revealed.  For example we mentioned that a linguistic community at first glance might seem simply to consist of everyone satisfying the trait of speaking a specific language.  Once we begin refining the idea, however, we see the inadequacies of this definition[11].  Even leaving aside the issues of regional linguistic variation mentioned above, we face fundamental questions such as how well one must speak a language to count as a member of the community.  This is not something that we can create an arbitrary rule for ("You must know 3000 words of language X to count as an X-speaker"); it involves being recognized by other members of the community as a speaker.  This moves beyond a description ("Everyone who speaks X") to considering how a member (or potential member) interacts with others in the group.

Indeed, the traits which philosophers have associated with vibrant and healthy communities almost all rely not simply on members satisfying a particular description, but rather on some kind of relation being present among members.   For instance, communication is often stressed as foundational to having a community.[12]  This requires having some kind of recognition of the other members of your community – unless you realize that someone else also belongs to your community, you are unlikely to feel a strong obligation to communicate with them.[13]  Similarly, sometimes community is taken to require a uniting bond and some kind of mutual concern.[14]  The uniting bond may be a shared interest or belief, which could certainly be captured descriptively.  However, a requirement of mutual concern is a specific relation defined among the members of that community; it is more complex than a property possessed by a single member.

This leads to the relational concept of community.  This concept incorporates some of the features of the descriptive concept, since often the members of a particular community will satisfy a common description.  However,  it is not the description which is the focus of this concept of community; instead, the focus is on the relations among members of the community, as well as between individual members and the community as a whole.  A community is thus no longer simply a set of people – it incorporates a particular kind of relation defined on it as well.

---

[11] The following is only one of many inadequacies in the definition; I certainly do not intend to suggest that this is all we need to clarify in order to have a perfect conception of a linguistic community.

[12]  John E. Smith's discussion in "The Value of Community: Dewey and Royce" of the role community plays in the work of those two philosophers contains a nice discussion of a community's need for communication.

[13]  Clearly you may end up communicating with nonmembers for various pragmatic reasons, such as needing to buy groceries in a foreign country, but you will not feel that there is any obligation to communicate with them for any more fundamental reason.

[14]  A number of people stress uniting bonds and the necessity of mutual concern.  See Andrew Mason's requirement of mutual concern in "Liberalism and the Value of Community" and Nancy Sherman's notion of transcendence in "The Virtues of Common Pursuit."

For instance, one very small (but fairly ubiquitous) kind of community that people commonly encounter is the clique. One does not become a member of a clique simply by satisfying a description that applies to the other members. It may certainly help you join the athletic clique if you are athletic or the popular girls' clique if you are a popular girl. However, to become a true member of that clique, you also have to be acknowledged by the other members as such. There is thus a relation of recognition between the new (or potential) member and other members of the clique.[15] Hence a full understanding of the community would likely involve realizing that to be a member you must both satisfy whatever general description suits most of the members of the clique and also be recognized as a member by a sufficient number of the members of that group. Note that this view of community does not eliminate the descriptive element. In most communities, there will still be something that binds the members – some trait that they have in common. However, satisfying that description alone is not sufficient for membership; members must also satisfy a requirement of recognition.

There are also communities where the relation in question is one of self-recognition (or perhaps more familiarly, self-identification); one becomes a member of that group by taking oneself to be a member. One place that this is often demonstrated is with respect to cultural identities. Cultural identities are not solely a product of one's national heritage or the racial category one falls into. There are people who may not culturally identify as Irish, say, because they or their families have lived elsewhere for a long time; the cultural traditions of Ireland are no longer particularly important to them. On the other hand, people may identify with the group even if they are not from Ireland. For instance, if a person marries a member of a cultural group, the spouse may start to absorb the traditions of the community; eventually they may self-identify as a member of that culture. Hence the relation in this case is between the member and the group as a whole rather than a relation between members of the group.[16]

The contrast between the descriptive and relational notions of community is illustrated by two common but distinct notions of geographical communities. A geographical community seems fairly easy to define on the descriptive notion; it is simply all people living within specified geographic boundaries. However, it is not clear that merely living on the same chunk of land is sufficient to be a member of a community. It is entirely possible to live somewhere and never know any of your neighbors and even, perhaps, to lack any shared fundamental goals or common beliefs. Hence one could certainly argue that this set of people does not form a community.[17]

This does not necessarily mean that geographical communities fail to exist, however. We can form something more recognizable as a community by adding some additional criteria. For instance, suppose we limit the group to members who are recognized by their neighbors either as belonging to the same group or as sharing the same concerns; perhaps everyone in the neighborhood is united

---

[15] It is not clear whether all members must recognize you as a member for you to be one. This will likely vary depending on the size of the community you are trying to join and the type of community. If it is a very tightly-knit community, probably a larger percentage of members will have to recognize you as a member in order for you to qualify. If it is less concerned with the relations among members than with other factors – such as common interests – probably a smaller percentage of members will have to recognize you.

[16] We will discuss in a moment whether self-identification is sufficient for group membership; it is likely that the member must also satisfy a particular description.

[17] See, for instance, Darrin Barney, "The Vanishing Table, Or Community in a World That is no World," p. 37.

by their desire to keep a shopping center from being built on the corner of a nearby street. Alternatively, it could be a case of self-identification where one is a member if one feels one belongs. These are both more robust notions of community; the relationship among the members transforms our set from a collection of people who only have one trait in common into a group of people who have common interests or beliefs.[18]

Indeed, this kind of distinction between mere geographic collection and claiming that those people share common goals or beliefs underlies the argument about whether national communities exist. Some people take nations to be merely collections of people within particular sets of geographic boundaries. They point to the undoubted variation in beliefs and practices across a nation and claim that there is no reason to think such a large, diverse group of people form a community. Others take it that there are fundamental traits that underlie a nation – either people have national pride and self-identify as a member of that nation, or they share common beliefs (such as in a right to freedoms of various kinds.)[19] The argument therefore comes down to a claim that a descriptive notion of nationhood is not a community, but this leaves open the question of whether there is a relational notion of national community.

This relational notion of community is less tidy than the descriptive notion, largely because the relation itself is quite fluid. It is not clear that each member needs to stand in relation to every other member. Particularly in a larger group, it is impractical to suggest that all members must recognize all other members as belonging to the community – many of the members may never come into contact. It may be instead that you simply need to be recognized by some member (who is in turn recognized by other members) in order to belong; this community would resemble a web or network of members, where there were chains of membership recognition, but not everyone would be recognized by everyone else.[20]

It is also not clear that self-identification is sufficient to be a member of a community. If I self-identify as Christian, say, but do not acknowledge any of the teachings of Jesus Christ, it is unclear whether I would actually belong to the Christian community; most of the other members of the Christian community would not recognize me as a member. There are two possibilities for explaining this. First, it could be that their recognition (or lack of recognition) overshadows my self-identification. Thus the fact that I self-identify as Christian is outweighed by the fact that most of them refuse to recognize me as such. However, it is questionable whether we wish to be committed to this stance. This puts a great deal of power in the hands of the majority, even with regard to fairly personal communities; do we want to claim that a person is misidentifying their sexual identity, say, simply because other members of the community do not take them to be gay or

---

[18] Exactly what kind of relation is defined on this community could vary. For instance, it could be a relationship wherein one member is recognized by another as belonging to the community. Or it could be a relation between the member and the community as a whole, such as where a person feels a part of the neighborhood/nation/etc. and thus self-identifies as a member of the community. We will discuss problems raised by self-identification further in a moment.

[19] David Miller has a detailed discussion what traits underlie the notion of national identity in his paper "In Defense of Nationality;" while geographic location is one of the traits, it is neither the only one nor the most important one.

[20] It is entirely possible that such a community is weaker than one in which everyone recognizes everyone else as a member. This sort of claim is made particularly about online communities. (For instance, see Hubert L. Dreyfus, *On the Internet* or Thomas C. Anderson "The body and communities in cyberspace: A Marcellian analysis.") However, a discussion of the strength of such relationships is beyond the scope of this paper.

lesbian? It is not clear why the opinion of others – even the opinion of a majority of others – overrules one's own assessment.

The second possibility is that the relational concept of community either always or usually includes a descriptive component. Therefore, the problem is not that I self-identify as Christian; the problem is that I do not satisfy even the most basic descriptive requirement. Granted, the description of Christianity must have some flexibility in it; there is disagreement within the religious community, as in most communities. However, some pieces of those descriptions have more importance than others, and a failure to recognize the teachings of Christ (or to recognize the existence of God, for that matter) would serve to disqualify one from the community. Under this conception of community, neither satisfying the description nor satisfying the relation is sufficient; it is necessary to satisfy both in order to be a member of the community.

IV.     Further Questions

The questions raised by self-identification point to a number of directions for further work; I will provide thoughts on a few of them here. I have proposed a notion of communities which involve both a descriptive and a relational component; one issue worth pursuing is whether those halves are both necessary. Could there be a community defined purely by a relation or a community defined purely by a description? I am not certain. We discussed  problems with purely descriptive communities in Section II; although the argument did not render descriptive communities impossible, it raised sufficient challenges to render their existence unlikely. As for the other extreme, I am wary of saying that communities can be defined solely by a relation. The Christianity example demonstrated certain problems with using self-identification as the only standard for community membership. Recognition by other members, however, also encounters a problem when there is no underlying description. Such a community would consist of people recognized as having membership in a group with no other criteria besides being acknowledged as members. Yet, if this were the case, on what basis would I recognize your membership? There appears to be no cohesiveness to such a group, no basis for affirming or rejecting someone as a member. Thus such a group lacks a coherent identity and does not seem to be something we would want to call a community.

If a community exists which is purely relational, then it seems that it will have to involve a more complex relation than one solely concerning membership; neither self-identification nor recognition by others suffices to generate a community. An open question, then, is whether we can devise a community which is defined without description, but rather in terms of our membership relation and some other more complex relation. One possibility for this additional relation would be the requirement of mutual concern mentioned above; perhaps it would be possible to define a community of those who recognized each others as members and exhibited said mutual concern. However, it is again not clear to me whether this provides sufficient basis to form a community; why should I have concern for another member of the group if there is no underlying shared trait? Further work is needed to reach a conclusion on this topic.

The recognition relation itself is open to further investigation, particularly as regards to whether I must be aware that I am recognized as a member of a community. We mentioned previously that it seemed odd that one could belong to a community, on the descriptive notion, without being aware

of that membership; this problem recurs for the relational notion if self-identification is unnecessary for community membership.  Consider the following illustration taken from the debate over the moral standing of animals.  In general, we believe that animals are unaware of their membership in the moral community and, as such, will not be able to fulfill the obligations we usually associate with members.[21]  For instance, we do not find tigers unethical for mauling humans, despite the fact that we would often find humans unethical for assaulting people in similar situations.  In part this stems from the fact that we believe humans to be aware of how it is permissible to treat other members of the moral community; tigers are not aware of this and perhaps are not capable of becoming aware of it.   If we generalize the recognition requirement to permit the recognition of unaware people as members, then we may encounter similar problems with imposing obligations on them as a result of that membership; like the tiger, there seems something potentially unfair about this.[22]   There is thus a question about whether self-identification is necessary for community membership or whether one can (under at least some circumstances) be a community member without knowing it.

One interesting place that this issue arises is in looking at past or future community membership.  The relation, as I have currently defined it, takes place in the present – it has to do with either being recognized (now) as a member or self-identifying (now) with a group.  Yet, of course, most communities exist beyond the present set of members; they have pasts and, hopefully, futures as well.  Furthermore, frequently there is a sense of identification with the past members and hopes for future members; there is some kind of relationship between these people and current members.  This relation needs to be explored in more detail, particularly in regard to the self-identification question raised above; neither past nor future members are in a position to self-identify as members at the present, which may further complicate our understanding of the relation needed for membership.

Other structural questions arise concerning the recognition relation.  We discussed earlier attempts to form communities of race from a descriptive standpoint and the problems generated thereby.  However, a relational community of African-Americans certainly exists; it would be worth considering other examples of communities that started off with a description (even a wildly incorrect description) and resulted in a true relational community.  Furthermore, there could be commonalities among disparate communities in terms of the recognition structures.  It would be worth investigating whether communities with weaker bonds of recognition (such as virtual communities) have fewer of the positive features we associate with communities.

V.     Conclusion

Arguments about communities are complicated by the temptation to take a shorthand description as a complete characterization of what a community is.   While it is possible that one might devise a community which is defined purely descriptively, it is clear that in general that concept of community will not suffice; simply picking out sets of people who share a trait is not a promising way to understand communities.  To do justice to the nature of communities, we require the added

---

[21] See, e.g., Roger Scruton's *Animal Rights and Wrongs* on this subject.
[22] I say "potentially" because it may be that in some circumstances you ought to be able to deduce that you have been so recognized; in this case, you could be informed if you chose to figure it out.  It is not clear that the obligations are unfair in such a case.  (Hence a person could not escape community obligations simply by trying to ignore her membership.)

complexity of the relational notion. This is not to say that description is irrelevant to understanding communities; indeed, it is likely that there will be a descriptive component to most, if not all, communities. Community membership will thus be a matter of satisfying a particular description and also either self-identifying or being recognized by others as a member of that community.

Further work remains to be done to clarify the relational concept of community. It remains an open question, at present, as to whether a community can exist which lacks either the descriptive or the relational component. Similarly, the exact nature of the relation deserves further study, particularly with regard whether I must self-identify as a member of a community or whether it is possible to be a member without knowing it. There are interesting questions of generalization related to how the relation functions when looking at community membership across time and also related to whether we can find structural similarities across different kinds of communities. With the current controversy over whether virtual communities are true communities, very interesting possibilities arise when considering whether the strength of the recognition relation might affect the positive or negative features of that community. The relational concept of community thus provides a better understanding of community than the descriptive concept, while leaving open a number of philosophically promising areas for further study.

References

Anderson, Thomas C. "The Body and Communities in Cyberspace: A Marcellian Analysis." *Ethics and Information Technology* 2.3 (2000): 153-158.

Barney, Darin. "The Vanishing Table, Or Community in a World That Is No World." *Community in the Digital Age*. Ed. Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield (2004): 31-52

Coady, C. A. J. *Testimony: A Philosophical Study.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, (1992).

Dreyfus, Hubert L. *On the Internet.* 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, (2009).

Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationality.* Ed. Linda Martín Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta. Oxford: Blackwell (2003): 75-89.

Lackey, Jennifer and Ernest Sosa. eds. *The Epistemology of Testimony*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, (2006).

Mason, Andrew. "Liberalism and the Value of Community." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 23 (1993): 215-239.

Miller, David. "In Defense of Nationality." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 10 (1993): 3-16.

Mills, Charles. "'But What Are You *Really*? The Metaphysics of Race." *Blackness Visible.* Ithaca: Cornell UP (1998): 41-66.

Putnam, Hilary. "The Meaning of 'Meaning.' " *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers, Volume 2.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1975): 215-271.

Scruton, Roger. *Animal Rights and Wrongs.* London: Continuum Press (2006).

Sherman, Nancy. "The Virtues of Common Pursuit." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993): 277-299.

Smith, John E. "The Value of Community: Dewey and Royce." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 12 (1974): 469-479.